Kwartler, Joel

Mrs. Wray, Soph Hon English, A2

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Living History Project

The Capture of a Man who deserves to Die Six Million Deaths

May 11th, 1960. From out of the humid darkness, headlights flash. Good headlights. Symbolic headlights. Headlights that mean so much and could mean so much that they are almost worth crying for.

*Headlights flash. From out of the hungry darkness, a car pulls up to a barracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau. An SS officer climbs from the back. Tonight, the darkness is my friend; the officer walks past me, unseeing, straight into the adjacent building. In the background, I can still hear the eternal wails. Cries for help, for food, for humanity, and for total relief: death. I wait three more seconds for the officer to pass and then run back to my barracks, my valuable find clutched in my hand, before another car arrives.*

Across the way, I see Peter Malkin climb out of the first car, a rented 1953 American model. He taps Ricardo Klement on the shoulder. I read his lips: “Un momentito, señor.”

*“One moment, Abraham.” I peek out of our shared bunk, shared meaning four others and myself to a single bed, one last time, to make sure no SS man is near. No one is. Into Abraham’s shaking, skeletal hands I place an apple core, half rotten. I’d found it during my nightly dash out of our barracks and along the side of the German road that ran through the camp. When I was lucky, which I was tonight, I would find a bit of edible trash.*

*“*D’anq*, Isaac.”*

*“Don’t thank me, Abraham. Just eat.” I pushed his hand, holding the apple, to his mouth. Abraham, age 15, three years my senior, was starving to death. And I was forced to watch.*

*He falls upon the core as only a starving man- no, a starving child -can. “Isaac, I’ve got something for you, this time.” Abraham reaches into his pocket and pulls out a rumpled wild daisy that he must have found while digging graves. It’s not that it’s a flower-there are a few of those around. It’s that it is a daisy of the type our mother used to cultivate in a small window box. My eyes water, but I have no time for tears. Besides, that wastes water, which isn’t exactly plentiful around here. Just the same, I turn, surprised that I can’t control my own basic emotions, to hide the tears from Abraham.*

Klement turns, surprised that someone would stop him on an apparently deserted street. Malkin goes for his throat, and out of the car climbs another agent, aimed at his legs. From our vantage point on the corner in a second car (also a cheap American one), we can see a short scuffle. Klement goes down, hard, letting out the terrible scream of the predator becoming the prey. They hit him fast, as they weren’t sure if he was carrying a gun or not. That was something we hadn’t been able to determine in 3 months of careful surveillance.

Then Klement is in the car, no doubt being tied. The plan calls for goggles with tape over them to be placed over his eyes so he can’t see. The first car drives off from Garibaldi Street along Route 202. We follow. I breathe again. And then I remember why I’m here.

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*March 14th, 1943. I slept poorly last night. It wasn’t because of the constant wails - I’m used to those now. I’m tired; my hands shake more than normal in searching the confiscated coats of now-prisoners at Auschwitz, looking for valuables under the watchful eye of my supervisor of the day. I still share a bunk, but share now means three other people and myself. Abraham…didn’t come back last night. And won’t come back again. I heard he was shot in a pitiful escape attempt; he turned and ran, sick of digging mass graves for his friends and neighbors and family, knowing full well he’d be shot in the back and die alone in the darkness.*

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March 20th, 1960. This entire operation is probably a shot in the dark, once again. So far, we have no positive ID of the man we want. And still, I’m sitting on a railway embankment, for yet another day, with two of my fellow Mossad agents. It’s probably pretty dangerous, but we’ve survived by listening for the trains and then jumping down right before they arrive. In the near distance, I can see Bus #203 stop. Klement, or should I call him Otto Henninger, gets off and walks toward his house. It is 7:40 PM. Otto/Klement circles his house once, likely looking for signs that something is amiss. Then he enters his house. I hope his last moments of freedom only serve as torturous memory when we extract him.

Up on the embankment, we sit for another few minutes and then return to our rental car. We climb in and drive to Tira, the safe house. “Nothing new,” I spit to my fellow colleagues. The group of Mossad agents gathered around the table nods, but no one speaks. Outside, a car horn honks. Around the table, we tense up. Shoulders and hairs raise. A hand reaches towards a holster, but the car honk fades. A slight exhale, but the tensions don’t fade. They never have, at least for me.

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March 3rd, 1960. I slam the door to my small house, which is really just a large room with some haphazardly compiled wall materials erected. I survey the room, focusing on a picture, a sketch drawn from memory, of Abraham, and mother, and father. That photo has become myself: it holds all of my sadness and anger. Every time I glance upon it, I resist the urge to throw something, to scream, to run out of here, all the way to Nuremburg, and fight my way through to a Nazi just so I can strangle the life out of him.

No, I’ve had to be content with joining the Mossad, a newly created agency that, I was told, hunts down Nazis. So far, all I’ve taken part in is wild goose chases, on the basis of sources that could lead to these monster-criminals that turned out to be either mistakes or too dated. But I’ve done exceedingly well, even in this, I’m told, and if the opportunity arrives I might even-

Ddddddrrrrrrrrinnggg! I stare down the phone. Ddddddrrrrrrinnngg!

“Shalom.”

“Isaac.”

“Yes?”

“Isaac Levi?”

“Yessss,” I hiss, impatient.

“Good. Are you alone?”

“Of course.” Who was I suppose to live with? The Mossad keeps tabs on most, and they know I’m not married. I’m too “angry” or “high-energy” to have either a willing roommate or girlfriend.

“I’ve got good news. You’re going to Argentina.”

“I’m sorry? Is this another cruel joke-another fading source for someone? Who is it this time? Hitler himself? That’s funny, because he’s already dead.”

“No, no. You’ll see. Show up at the new travel agency on your corner. You’ll be briefed further there, tomorrow, at 7:00 sharp.”

“Oh, that’s great. We can’t even afford to schedule our own flights; now we’re using a young travel agency. Did they promise in-flight meals? Are you sure you aren’t joking?”

“Actually, Isaac, we are the travel agency. And you should learn to speak to your fellow operatives with more respect.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sorry. I only just got called off Italy on a fake lead for Eichmann, and so, after spending 3 days, all day, learning Italian so I could ‘blend in,’ I find out that he’s definitely not in Italy any more. Who are you to tell me what to do?” I figured I was talking to one of the old desk agents on the third floor.

“Isser Harel.” Click.

“Oh.” I look again at the sketch of my family, all now deceased, and then I throw the phone to the end of its cord. I can’t control myself enough to speak with civility. Not even to the head of the whole Mossad.

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March 21st, 1960. I’m on the railway embankment. I hate it up here. It’s often cold, or damp, and always uncomfortable. The railway ties are uneven and often scrape one’s skin. But it could be worth it. Especially today.

At precisely 7:40 PM, bus #203 stops. Klement gets off, and turns, and-yes. Yes. Yes! He is holding flowers. Flowers-today! I look excitedly at Malkin, who nods, almost imperceptibly, in return. Today, March 21st, 1960, is Klement’s silver wedding anniversary. Now we know that we’ve got the right man, after enough wild-goose chases to stuff a pillow with the feathers.

I glance back, just to make sure that I’m not imagining things. I’m not, and through the binoculars I catch a glimpse of a small flower as it falls from the bouquet before Klement can get inside his house. It’s a daisy. Of the kind my mother used to cultivate. I want to keep watching it, but his foot crunches unintentionally over the flower as he continues to walk, and it is pounded into the pavement. Then the binoculars in my hands start to shake too much to use properly, and Malkin takes them from me. “I know,” he says softly, putting a hand on my shoulder. “I know.”

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May 11th, 1960. Today. Finally. After months of surveillance, dozens of rental cars, two safe-houses, and the arrival of many Mossad operatives, including a forger, doctor, interrogator, and cell-building specialist, the day has arrived. We all knew it’d be sometime around now, because of the Argentinean celebration of 150 years of independence. Ironic, really. We go to an extreme effort to covertly extract Klement from Argentina because we know that if we involve the Argentinean government, we won’t ever catch him. And when all is done, the Argentineans will get mad- mad! -that we’ve taken Klement off of their soil. So, we’re using, as cover, the heightened activity of the celebration honoring of the government that won’t even ignore its sovereignty claims for someone who directly caused the death of tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of people.

A plan has been outlined.

“You’ll be in my car, Isaac.”

“Gladly, Ehud.”

“Don’t thank me yet. If anything goes wrong, we’re cleaning it up.” But he’s just talking; spirits have been lifted a bit for today. He knows I’ve already gone over the details six times in my head. He sees the cold metal in my eyes.

“You’d better,” offers Gabi. He’s in charge of car one. There’ll be two cars. One on the corner that faces Klement when he gets off of his bus, and one along the street. God! By the end of today, we’ll either have him or we’ll likely never catch him. I can’t wait to see him embarrassed, stripped of all authority, emotionally destroyed, and, ultimately, dead. He deserves worse. He-

“Whoah! Careful there.”

“Sorry, Ehud.” The bottle of water I had been holding had exploded from the pressure of my grip as I’d let my thoughts wander to their usual territory. “Just thinking.”

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7:35 PM, May 11th 1960. I’m in the back of car number two, trying not to look suspicious, whatever that means. Five minutes. Five long, slow minutes. Then he’ll show up. In the back of my mind, where I keep my emotions at times like this, I realize that I secretly want Malkin to crush Klement. To take him out so hard that his head splits open on the pavement.

His name isn’t really Ricardo Klement. Nor is it Otto Henninger. Otto Eckmann is a little closer to the truth. His real name, a name that’s kept me angry for over a decade, is Adolf Eichmann. The Nazi. The man in charge of the final solution. The man who helped deport over 490,000 Hungarian Jews to concentration camps. The man who played a central role in the deaths of 1.5 million Jews. 1.5 million Abrahams. A man whose very mention causes me hatred stronger than I knew was possib-

“Isaac.” Ehud touches me on the shoulder, once, with a warning glance.

“What?” I notice I’m out of breath. I must have been breathing heavily. “I’m fine.” There’s no room for emotional distraction now.

THUNK! Outside, at the front of the car, one of the agents knocks something inside the engine and it falls. His partner reprimands him, but unless the wrench he dropped broke something, we’re fine. The engine is also fine, but it was decided that both our car and car one, a few dozen yards away, would have sorts of engine trouble for ‘cover.’

Actually, while I’m thinking of it, I glance to car one, thirty yards away, something we are only supposed to do every ten minutes to avoid the idea that we are associated with them. Everything looks fine, but then, all of a sudden, the inconspicuous bicyclist, who’d passed us just seconds earlier, stops at the front of the car next to the agent tinkering with the engine. Instantly, I notice odd bulges in his clothes, such as his front right pocket; it’s an ideal place for a gun to be carried. I inhale sharply, but then, two seconds later, the biker continues on. I’ve no idea what he wanted, but I don’t think our cover was blown.

“Mmm…” Ehud, in the front, had his watch out. 7:40. Sure enough, bus #203’s headlights flash around the corner.

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*July 17th, 1958. Headlights flash around the corner as I speed onward. It’s probably two in the morning by now, but I don’t care. There are exactly two things that provide relief from the constant hatred and burden to avenge my family: sleep, and driving. Racing is more like it. I suppose it’s because I think that if I can go fast enough, I can go back in time and stop it. Or maybe because I feel I can outrun the constant, addictive, destructive cocktail of emotions. Or maybe even because this forces me to focus on the road. I don’t know. I only know that this momentary relief is well worth the $500 in speeding tickets that I’ve accumulated over the past decade.*

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But Eichmann doesn’t get off.

We can’t see inside the bus, but he should be on it. Did the biker tip him off? I recall my picture of the cyclist and vow that, if that is the case, I will one day find him and punish him accordingly. He’d have to be a substitute for the hands-on experience I’d like to have with Eichmann.

Ehud is biting his lip in the front, something he does when nervous. I’m assuming Gabi, Malkin, and the others in car one are just as worried. “We’ll wait,” Ehud commands. He’ll probably wait as long as Gabi does.

After ten minutes of tense silence another bus arrives. We all resume readiness positions. The bus stops. The doors open. One man gets off, but he’s too short to be Klement. Besides, he walks the wrong way, away from us.

And still we wait.

The two agents in front are still fiddling with the exposed engine, trying to look engaged. Their palms are probably too sweaty to work. If we’ve somehow ruined our chances of getting Eichmann…if we never get him…my hate won’t stop. It’s what keeps me motivated. My body, though, might; if I have to retire before we catch him, then I’ll waste away a hermit. I’d be too angry to tolerate anyone’s presence. Damn! We’d better catch him. He deserves worse than what we’ve got for him.

And then, at 8:05 PM, yet another bus arrives. The doors open. And a man climbs out. It’s fairly dark, so it takes us 15 seconds to make the man out. It’s Eichmann.

At precisely the right moment, Ehud turns his key and hits the headlight switch. And then the headlights flash.

In less than thirty seconds, Malkin has gotten Eichmann into the car. Gabi speeds- within the speed limit -away, and we follow about a minute behind. So far, we’re successful.

Forty minutes later, we arrive at Tira, the safe house. Eichmann is hustled into his ‘cell’ that the specialist constructed, and one leg is chained to a bedpost. We now have Eichmann in our possession. We’re not out of the water yet, though; we’ve still got to transport him, somehow, across an ocean and the continent of either Europe or Asia.

Malkin comes and sits next to me at the table. He appears perfectly calm, until I see his eyes. They are bright with revulsion.

“He identified his SS numbers: 45326, 63752. It’s definitely him. Although his tattoo had been removed.”

“Well,” I offer.

“Well,” he replies. “I told him he killed my sister’s son. I told him that he was just his son's age. I said, ‘Also blond and blue-eyed, just like your son, and you killed him.’” Malkin stopped, to check his intense contempt. “And he seem confused, but then he said…then…he said…’Yes, but he was Jewish, wasn’t he?’”

I’m glad that only the interrogator, Kenet, may speak to him. I don’t think, if I started to talk to him, I could stop before Eichmann lay dead on the ground in front of me.

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May 20th, 1960. Today is the new “the day.” Meaning that we already got Eichmann, so today’s the day. We’re taking him back, to try him for his crimes, ultimately.

Isser and a few others have spent the last week scoping the Buenos Aires airport. It’s pretty risky, but because of the celebration’s unique circumstances, we are planning to try and fly out on an Israeli airlines’ company’s, El-Al’s, jet.

Isser and a few have been out and about, but the rest of us have remained cooped up in the house. Everyone is tense and on edge, and stir crazy.

“Isaac, hand me that bread knife, will you?” Dani, another operative, snaps.

“Here.”

“Thanks.”

“Mmm.”

“Let’s see how this works…” The cooking here is no good, because none of us bothered to learn how to cook. We, or I, at least, have been too obsessed with catching Eichmann and other Nazis to care.

“Alright. Done. I’ll take this to him.” Dani was going to take him the soup/liquid food mixture.

“Did you drug it?” I want to double check.

“Of course.” Eichmann’s food would be drugged, so his senses were dull when he took him aboard the El-Al plane.

Hours later, we are approaching the airport. We’ve got three cars; Eichmann is in the second. I am in the third, observing the other two. We’ve only got a few tests left, but these are enormous ones.

If the guard checking the cars at this entrance suspects something, he’ll call the police. We cannot risk stating that we are Mossad members, so we’ll identify ourselves as a volunteer group that captured Eichmann. Eichmann will likely be set free, or his trial delayed, possibly for years. We will go to jail, and we will not have the backing of the Israeli government (we cannot be associated with them if we fail). Our mission will have been a failure.

The first car passes through experiencing only a minor exchange with the guard, which is good. Hopefully, he’s too busy to focus on Eichmann, “asleep” in the back of the second car.

It pulls up and stops. We’re only fifteen feet away, directly behind it. The guard says something, and then looks more closely in the backseat. In our car, the breathing gets heavier. We prepare to try and rush through the entrance, if necessary.

The guard rolls down his window. It looks like he says: “Why’s he sleeping?”

Eichmann *can’t* be woken; it will be obvious he’s drugged. That alone will arouse enough suspicions for further investigation.

Gabi feeds the guard the line about the fun time Eichmann supposedly had on vacation in Argentina, and that he didn’t get much sleep last night. The guard doesn’t appear to buy it, though.

No, this can’t happen. Not now. We are *so close* to success. My mixed emotions all merge into anxiety.

He’s about to reach over and tap Eichmann. Just in time, Malkin speaks up. I don’t know what he says, because his head is turned away, but the guard laughs and then waves the car through.

As our car pulls up, it is almost comical how we try to hide our brief excitement. It would be funny, but there’s too much on the line. As Malkin told me, “We can’t mess up. There are six million pairs of eyes watching us.”

Less than an hour later, Eichmann is strapped in a crew seat at the back of the plane. The plane will ignore its previous route and fly straight to Israel. As I climb on, the pilot stops me.

“Hey – who’s that guy, and why’s he still asleep?” The pilot asks. El-Al has been told to have their most reliable crew for this flight, but we didn’t tell them why.

“Oh, him. He’s from a different crew. A car hit him when he took a day in the city, and he was concussed. The doctors said he’s fine to fly straight home by now. It’s been a month.” This cover story was elaborately concocted. A friend of one of the Mossad agents on this mission, named Rafael, was admitted into an Argentinean hospital complaining of concussion symptoms. Since doctors can only follow what a patient tells them with concussion recovery, our doctor instructed Rafael how to time his recovery so he’d be released today. Then, we just substituted in Eichmann.

“Really? Because-“

“One of us has the letter from the doctor,” I offered, much too quickly. I can’t be the one to mess us up, and I mentally kick myself.

“Never mind.” The pilot is obviously not satisfied, but he knows I’ll stick to this story. Then I remember that it doesn’t really matter, because if he suspects something he’ll bring it up to the notice of the Israeli police when we land. By then, we’ll be safe.

I go to my seat, one row in front of Eichmann. I, too, am dressed as a steward. Tucked in my breast pocket, invisible, is a daisy I’d found as we left the safe house. As the plane takes off, I relax. I can feel the strains of the last twenty years as they leave me, to stay behind in Argentina. After all, we got Eichmann. I turn next to me and offer a small smile to Ehud. He nods. Malkin, behind me, offers a whispered prayer of thanks.

When we land in Israel, Eichmann will be handed over to the central Israeli government, not just the Mossad. From there, he will eventually end up on trial, in Israel. That was half the reason for Eichmann’s capture. Half to punish him (which helped the emotions of all 30 of us involved; we’d been selected because we had been through the Holocaust), and half to try him in front of the world and expose the true horror of the Holocaust. Although, for us, revenge was most satisfying, the exposure was the real importance of this mission.

Sure, the Argentineans will cry about the infraction of sovereignty, but they definitely won’t get Eichmann back. Besides, they have my hatred, which I left behind, to cope with, and I know from experience that it takes decades to alleviate.

“What are you going to do with your life, now?” I whisper to Ehud.

“The same,” he whispers back.

“We’ll never get anyone as big as Eichmann, though,” I reply.

“Yes, but that’s not why I’m doing it, anymore. I – we - got Eichmann. Now, I must work to make sure that a Holocaust never happens again. That involves capturing the original creators and any who’d follow in their footsteps.”

I mull this alien idea over in my mind. I’d never thought of prevention, only of revenge. I didn’t see the value of it, until now. “Count me in.”

As we head out over the ocean, the flashing headlights of the city fade into the horizon until they wink out of sight.